

## Article

# Religious Boundaries through Emotions: The Representation of Emotions and Their Group-Forming Function in Alevi Poetry

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**Abstract:** Although emotions occupy an important place in Alevism, their representation in Alevi history and the present has not yet been sufficiently researched. This study addresses this desideratum and discusses the representation and codification of emotions on the basis of central representatives of Alevi poetry. The focus of this study is the conjunction of constitutive teachings with basic emotions. In the poems, religious beliefs that are considered constitutive are explicitly linked to emotions such as love, grief and anger. In this way, central beliefs become emotionally charged and correspondingly more accentuated. At the same time, the poems convey an emotional expectation to the target audience: various rhetorical stylistic devices are used to convey to the addressees how they should react emotionally to certain ideas, memories and beliefs. In this way, these emotions fulfil the function of feeling rules that must be observed in order to be part of the collective. The analysis of Alevi poetry suggests that emotions have been an important factor in the history of Alevism for social order, group formation and religio-cultural demarcation.

**Keywords:** emotions; Alevism; poetry; feeling rules; community formation



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## 1. Introduction

Emotions are an integral part of religions. There are many ways of expressing emotions in religious communities, be it in individual or collective ritual practices, at religious sites and, eventually, in textual form. Religious literature, and religious poetry within it in particular, is permeated with emotional motifs. The representation of emotions in religious texts is often not only an expression of an individual emotion of the respective author, but the represented emotions can also fulfil socio-religious functions. A shared emotionality and ideas about proper emotionality are, thus, an important factor in the constitution of religious communities (Rosenwein 2007, p. 24 f.; Knoblauch and Herbrich 2013, pp. 223–25). This is also evident in Alevism, where especially the highly valued religious poetry gives many indications of the importance of emotions in religious community formation. In Alevism, poetry is, alongside direct interaction, the most important medium for communicating religious convictions across generations. For the understanding of Alevism as a religious culture, poetry is in many ways the first starting point, both for the reconstruction of central teachings and the representation of emotions (Kara 2023a, p. 41). Although the Alevi poetic tradition is also permeated with emotion-related themes, the representation of emotions has not yet been systematically explored. However, a look at emotions in Alevi poems reveals various genuine aspects of Alevi belief and group formation.

This paper addresses this issue and examines the representation of emotions in the Alevi poetic tradition. As an empirical basis, the poems of three poets are used who are considered to be among the most widely received and revered poets of Alevi history, as well as in the present: Pir Sultan Abdal, Kul Himmət and Hatayı. The poems of all three are widely regarded as seminal and classic examples of Alevi poetry, which are ubiquitous in daily life and ritual practice in musical form (Tiraz 2021a, p. 133 f.; Carspecken and Özdoğan 2017, pp. 199 f.; Çıblak Coşkun 2014, pp. 111, 175 f.). At the same time, their poems are

interwoven with emotionally relevant themes, which are examined more closely in this paper. On the one hand, this paper examines which emotions are textually represented in the poems, and what metaphors, imagery and rhetorical means are used to evoke them. On the other hand, it is deciphered how these emotions are connected to the central teachings of Alevism. Sociological research on emotions shows how social groups emotionally charge central and constitutive ideas in order to give them more weight (von Scheve 2019, p. 343 f.). The present study, therefore, takes a closer look at the emotional charging of central Alevi teachings. In this context, this study examines what functions these emotional charges fulfil with regard to the central teachings.

After a brief discussion of the underlying concept of emotion, the poetry tradition in Alevism and the selection of poets are outlined. Subsequently, a closer look is taken at the ways in which the most central emotions are portrayed in the poems of these three poets. A comparative analysis shows that the emotions of grief, anger and love, as well as the mood of melancholy, are the most important emotional motifs in the oeuvre of the three poets. Thus, these four central emotions and moods, together with their poetic representation, are analysed in more detail. Finally, the socio-religious dimension and group-forming function of the emotions are explored.

## 2. Emotions and Their Socio-Cultural Dimension

The study of emotions in cultural studies has received immense attention in recent years, such that many researchers, analogous to the linguistic and cultural turn, now also state an emotional turn in cultural studies (Beitl and Schneider 2016). Religious studies have also received new and important impulses from this turn to emotionally relevant topics, although its application to religious communities in the Islamic world and within it to religious minorities has remained limited (cf. Gade 2008; Basu and Werbner 2002; Werbner 2020; Abu-Lughod 2016, pp. 171–232; Elias 2018). With regard to Alevism, there are only a few studies that take an emotion-theoretical approach. The majority relates to emotions in ritual practice.<sup>1</sup> A historical or source-based analysis, however, is mostly lacking. However, the lyrical traditions that are so central in Alevism show very large intersections with relevant questions of emotion studies.

Given the sheer amount of emotion-relevant research, it is also not surprising that there are many suggested definitions of what is understood under emotions. In particular, the question of the universality and cultural and historical specificity of emotions has generated wide-ranging debate in research among different disciplines (Damasio 1996; Scheer 2019; Reddy 2001; Schahadat 2016). It would go beyond the scope of this paper to adequately reflect these debates here. However, most researchers agree that emotions cause a situational and sudden physiological change of state due to an external trigger. Emotions are, thus, intentional, i.e., object related and to be understood as a reaction to a stimulus. These triggering objects can then develop a representability beyond the situational emotion and be closely linked to the respective emotion. Snakes, for example, are dangerous and trigger the emotion of fear (Köppe 2012, p. 375 f.; Döring and Berninger 2013, p. 50). To be distinguished from emotions are, for example, moods that last longer and are not necessarily object related, thus not caused by an external trigger. Rather, it is a basic mood, such as a cheerful or melancholic state of mind (Köppe 2012, p. 377; Reents 2016, p. 171).

As much as emotions are physical, individual, and arbitrary, there is also consensus that emotions also have a social and cultural dimension—although there is, as mentioned above, disagreement about the scope and extent (Kasten 2003, p. XIV). According to literary scholar Simone Winko, emotions, as conveyed in the literature, are “coded feelings [ . . . ] with a semiotic basis” (Winko 2003, p. 110). The focus is, thus, less on the actual biological processes of experiencing feelings but rather on their representation in textual form. This representation, in turn, is based on the signs, codes and meanings of the culture in which the literary product was created.

Research on emotions in literary studies has proposed numerous methods for analysing emotions in lyrical texts. Tilmann Köppe, for example, presented a threefold representation of emotions and a corresponding threefold method of analysis. According to this, emotions in poems are conveyed on three different levels: Diegetic (i.e., action-related level) in which emotions are not explicitly expressed but are implicitly conveyed by the protagonists and the actions among them. The second type of representation is much more concrete and easier to grasp; here, emotions are openly addressed. On the third level, the poem, as a whole, can be said to have an emotional expressive quality—when one can speak of a sad or angry poem, for example (Köppe 2012, pp. 377–79).

An important dimension in the study of emotions in social groups is their normative component. Social communities set up norms, expectations and rules regarding emotions. In this context, the US sociologist Arlie Hochschild proposes the concept of feeling rules (Hochschild 1979, pp. 563–69). This means that communities establish rules for emotions: when and under what circumstances which emotions are expected from the subjects belonging to the community. Thus, there are certain expectations for subjects to show a corresponding emotion in certain situations. In this way, emotions fulfil a socially ordering and group-forming function, as shared emotionality can be understood as an important factor in the construction of collectives (cf. Coşan Eke 2021, p. 157 f.; Knoblauch and Herbrik 2013, pp. 223–25). Furthermore, sociologist Christian von Scheve describes an intriguing phenomenon in which certain values and beliefs that are constitutive for a group or community are charged with emotional meaning in order to strengthen “the emotional basis of collective identity” (von Scheve 2019, pp. 343 f.). Accordingly, communities link convictions that are important to them with certain emotions, which gives them a stronger emphasis within the community. Applied to religious communities, this would mean that certain doctrines, teachings or memories are emotionally charged in order to give them more weight within the religious community.

### 3. Poetry in Alevism

Poetry occupies a central place in Alevism. No other medium has been used more in the history of Alevism to transmit religious knowledge and express emotions. Poetry is not only one of many forms of religious expression but by far the most important. The centrality of poetry can also be seen, for example, in the fact that poets receive religious veneration: they are not only regarded as mediators of religious knowledge but also as saints of the Alevi path (cf. Tiraz 2021a, pp. 131 f.; Aksünger-Kizil and Kahraman 2018, pp. 87–90; Soileau 2017, p. 554; Karolewski 2015). At the same time, among literary genres, poetry is often considered the one that conveys a high degree of emotion (Köppe 2012, p. 374). Consequently, it will also come as no surprise that emotionally relevant themes are evidently often represented in the Alevi poetic tradition.

This also raises the question of representation beyond the genre. After all, the pronounced emotionality in Alevi poetry could also be interpreted as a genre-specific characteristic found in other contexts beyond the religious community; the emotional expressions would then relate more to the genre and less to the community (cf. Rosenwein 2007, p. 27). However, the choice of genre was probably not arbitrary but an active decision; after all, Alevi authors preferred poetry and, thus, a format that can express a high degree of emotionality. The vast majority of authors embraced in the Alevi tradition wrote primarily lyrical works, and only a handful of them also composed theoretical prose works (Kara 2023a, pp. 39–44). In favouring poetry, they also chose a format that conveys emotionality on a large scale. Of course, other social, literary and cultural reasons may have influenced the choice in favour of poetry. In particular, the aspect of easier circulation and mobility in oral form may also have been an important reason for the preference of poetry. Poems are usually easier to memorise and recite than other literary genres and can, thus, fulfil the function of a memory aid (Tiraz 2021b). In this context, they also occupy a central place in ritual practice as performance media and accompany in musical form the performance of ritual acts (Hendrich 2004, p. 159; Tiraz 2021b). Especially when set to music, they are

generally more accessible and particularly engaging to recipients. This, in turn, suggests that the expression and communication of emotions equally played an important role in the choice of genre—especially when comparing the small number of religious theoretical works with the large variety of poetry in Alevi history (Kara 2023a).

Despite its great importance, it is only in recent years that research on Alevi poetry has emerged that has started to address the diversity of this subject (e.g., Tiraz 2021b; Soileau 2017; Oktay-Uslu 2020; Karamustafa 2016; Carspecken and Özdoğan 2017; Tee 2013; Birkalan-Gedik 2018; Dressler 2003; Kara 2023b). The emotional component of this poetry, however, has only been marginally addressed so far. In some works, the importance of emotions in Alevi poetry is emphasised but not further analysed (e.g., Tee 2013, pp. 6 f., 9; Birkalan-Gedik 2018, pp. 215, 220; Carspecken and Özdoğan 2017, pp. 196, 198). Particularly noteworthy is Mark Soileau's study of the commemoration of martyrdom in Alevi poetry, which also addresses emotional motifs (Soileau 2017; see also Soileau 2020). However, systematic research on emotions in Alevi poetry is still pending, just as there are countless other research gaps in this field. In his study on the transmission of tradition in Alevism through poetry, Hasret Tiraz takes up parts of these fundamental desiderata, such as the systematisation, periodisation or typologisation of Alevi poetry. In this context, he proposes a rough periodisation of Alevi poetic history and, within this, a "classical" period in which the central topoi of Alevi poetry were consolidated (Tiraz 2021a, p. 133; cf. Gölpinarlı 1963, pp. 5–8). For example, there is a selection of particularly central poets, whom Alevis revere as the Great Seven Poets (*Yedi Ulu Ozan*). These poets can all be assigned to this phase of the classical period. However, it is not known when and under what circumstances this selection was made. What is undoubted, however, is the reception of this selection today; be it Alevi intellectuals, functionaries or religious leaders—they all emphasise the centrality of these seven poets (e.g., Aksünger-Kizil and Kahraman 2018, p. 88). Today, the religious veneration of some of these poets is even comparable to that of sacred figures, such as the Prophet Muhammad, Ali or the Twelve Imams.<sup>2</sup>

Among these seven great poets, three stand out particularly, as their musicalised poems are central to ritual practice and very present in the daily lives of many Alevis: Pir Sultan Abdal, Kul Himmet and Hatayi (cf. Tiraz 2021a, p. 133; Carspecken and Özdoğan 2017; Akbalık 2015, pp. 51 f.; Mélikoff 1998, pp. 304–15; Çıblak Coşkun 2014, pp. 111, 175 f.). Especially in the Alevi collective prayer, the *Cem* ceremony, poems by these poets are recited. Chronologically, all three poets are assigned to the Early Modern Period, more specifically to the 16th century (Mélikoff 1998, pp. 304–15). However, the poets can hardly be identified historically; rather, it must be assumed that several people are hidden behind these poet names. In the classical Turkish–Persian poetic tradition, poets usually immortalised themselves by mentioning their name in the last stanza.<sup>3</sup> For this purpose, they often chose a pen name (*mahlas*) that corresponded to their religious beliefs—for example, *Hatayi*, which means the "imperfect one" and is meant to express spiritual humility. This mention by name in the last stanza is often the only clue to assigning a poem to a person. However, there is much evidence that several historical persons used these pen names over a long period of time. The pen name *Hatayi*, for example, was first used by the Safavid Shah Ismail I (1487–1524), who is revered in Alevism as a political figure and pioneering poet. To pay homage to the religiously revered Shah, several Alevi poets in Anatolia repeatedly used this pen name and wrote poems in *Hatayi*'s name. Therefore, they are called Anatolian *Hatayi* or pseudo-*Hatayi* in academic literature (Gallagher 2004, pp. 151–67; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 333–37). However, research has so far not been able to decipher the individual historical figures behind the pen name *Hatayi* besides the Safavid Shah. Nevertheless, the poems of Anatolian or pseudo-*Hatayi* are omnipresent in ritual practice—also due to the constructed connection to the religiously revered Safavid Shah Ismail I. In fact, the poems of pseudo-*Hatayi* are used far more in Alevi rituals and are known more among Alevis than those of Ismail I.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the historian Rıza Yıldırım classifies poems by pseudo-*Hatayi* among the core sources of Alevism (Yıldırım 2018a, p. 78). The same could also be said of Pir Sultan Abdal and Kul Himmet (Koerbin 2011;

Carspecken and Özdoğan 2017; Tek 2016; Yardımcı 2014; Mélikoff 1998, pp. 304–15). Pir Sultan Abdal, Kul Himmet and pseudo-Hatayi (hereafter Hatayi) are, thus, not only the most received poets in Alevi history, but their poems also represent a wide range of emotionally relevant themes.

#### 4. Representation of Emotions in Alevi Poetry

There are a number of emotions that are conveyed diegetically, thematically and at the level of expression in the poems of Pir Sultan, Hatayi and Kul Himmet. In particular, grief, anger, melancholy and, eventually, love and happiness are the most common emotions and moods conveyed in the poems. The representation and evocation of these emotions occupy such a central place that it is even difficult to find poems by the three that do not address one of these emotions. Accordingly, the following provides examples of how these emotions are evoked and which metaphors, as well as motifs, are used for this purpose. In this way, the religio-cultural codification of the discussed emotions are reconstructed. Therefore, paradigmatic examples of recurring topoi are discussed, which stand *pars pro toto* for the oeuvre of the poets and can be found in a variety of ways.<sup>5</sup>

##### 4.1. Grief and Compassion

The basic emotion of grief is a central motif in the poems of the three poets. It is very often associated with the suffering of Alevi saints and taken up as a result of compassion. In the Alevi collective memory, the lives of persons perceived as saints are very often stories of suffering. For example, the history of the Twelve Imams, who are revered as central saints in Alevism, is consistently a story of suffering. In the collective memory of the Alevi, they were all murdered, although this is not always supported by historical research.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, from the pantheon of Sufi saints, primarily those figures were chosen who were subjected to particular torment and suffering during their lifetime and often died as martyrs, for example, the Sufi martyrs Seyyid Imadeddin Nesimi (d. 1417) and Mansur al-Hallaj (858–922), who are frequently referred to in the Alevi poetry tradition and whose mourning even found its way into ritual practice (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 35, 50, 99–102, 122; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 44, 57, 78, 87 f., 125, 135 f.; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 344, 404, 428, 435, 443, 488, 514, 523).

However, in no other topic is the mourning and sympathy for the suffering of the saints as evident as in the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (Turkish spelling Hüseyin, 626–680), the Prophet's grandson and son of Imam Ali (600–661), who was murdered with several followers in the desert of Karbala in 680. The event has cemented itself like no other in the collective memory of Alid groups and has given rise to different cultures of remembrance. While motifs such as guilt in the sense of hereditary sin are also prevalent among Shiite groups, the Alevi culture of remembrance is dominated by mourning and deep sympathy (Kara 2023b). In no other medium is this mourning expressed more strongly than in poetry. There is even a subgenre of poetry in Alevism and other Alid groups that takes up the events in Karbala and openly mourns their victims, the so-called *Mersiyye* (Soileau 2017, pp. 554 f.; Toprak 2004). These poems have an important place in the Alevi poetic tradition and among the poets mentioned: all three poets have written several of these mourning poems for Imam Husayn.<sup>7</sup> The focus in the poetry is on empathy and deep grief for his suffering, which causes the grief of the poets and, in this way, also of the addressees. Thus, the object and the trigger of grief in the poems of the said poets are very often the suffering and death of people perceived as saints.

The poets express their grief in a very metaphorical way. In a poem by Kul Himmet, a flower loses its petals due to the grief for Husayn, and the water in the rivers no longer flows (Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 44, 107–11). Pir Sultan Abdal describes how even a sheep was deeply upset by the events in Karbala and bursts into tears out of grief, thus also moving the lyrical subject to tears (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 117). The performative display of grief through sighs and, especially, through tears of the lyrical subject occupies a central place and provides grief with an aesthetic, physical, and action-oriented dimension

(Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 57, 64, 91, 115, 217 f., 247 f.; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 44, 53, 80, 109; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 408–10, 430, 505). In particular, the weeping for Imam Husayn but also for the other Imams is a recurring topos. Kul Himmət writes how he wanders through the mountains weeping and how “earth and sky” would join him in weeping for Imam Husayn; in another poem, even earth and sky are “pierced by his tears” (Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 109, 111, 157, 166, see also pp. 44, 171). Pir Sultan has a conversation with a water mill in one poem and interprets the rising and falling of the water as the shedding of tears. The lyrical subject then asks the water mill why it sheds tears and whether it could not “bring Husayn a glass of water”—alluding to the fact that Imam Husayn and his followers suffered from thirst in the desert of Karbala (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 124). Hatayi even “burningly” weeps for Imam Husayn’s suffering, joined not only by nightingales with a lament but also by angels on the throne of heaven (Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 409, 517 f.). The metaphors, especially the inclusion of animals, angels, and even inanimate objects, elevate the mourning for Husayn to a supernatural level and thereby give it a sacred validity.

#### 4.2. Righteous Anger and Negative Emotions

Closely linked to the historical event of Karbala is the representation of another basic emotion: anger or, more precisely, righteous anger. In their poetry, Alevis regularly curse Husayn’s adversary, the second Umayyad caliph Yazid I (Turkish spelling Yezit, 644–683), who is held responsible for Husayn’s murder. Similar to the poems of the *Mersiyye* tradition, the “curse on Yazid” (“lanet Yezid’e”) is an important part of ritual practice.<sup>8</sup> There are several poems by Hatayi that repeatedly call out in the refrain “therefore I curse Yazid”, which are also recited in ritual practice in musical form (Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 343, 460). In each verse he lists new reasons why Yazid deserves his cursing and anger. Thus, one verse states: “They did not love Muhammad and Ali, therefore I curse Yazid” (ibid.). Thus, the nonobservance of another emotion, discussed in more detail below, namely, love for the Prophet and Ali, is a reason for the cursing.

At the same time, Yazid is stylised as the personification of people’s lower dispositions and emotions. For in the poems, not only desirable emotions are thematised but also emotions that are to be avoided. These negative emotions can be summarised under the collective term *nefs*. Literally, *nefs* means the “ego” of the human being, but in a figurative sense it stands for the lower qualities and emotions resulting from egoism.<sup>9</sup> Hatayi describes the qualities of these ego-driven negative attitudes as sevenfold, comparable to the seven deadly sins (Aslanoğlu 1992, p. 369).

This commanding ego has seven faces

Strife, defamation, rage, envy

Greed, lust is common to all

Slander no one, O brother. (ibid.)<sup>10</sup>

Some of these qualities of the negative ego are certainly emotionally relevant, such as rage or envy, which the poets explicitly warn against. A recurring topos is to overcome these negative emotions with positive ones. In the following stanza, Hatayi writes that love is needed to counteract these negative emotions (ibid.). A poem attributed to the central saint figure Hacı Bektaş Veli (d. 1271) similarly states: “Greed and hatred become nothing in our rituals through love” (Özmen 1998, vol. 1, p. 51).

Hardly any character stands for these negative emotions as much as Yazid, who was guided by these negative emotions and, accordingly, brought suffering upon Husayn. He is stylised as a compulsive man governed by negative emotions, which led him to commit harmful acts which, in turn, led to suffering for others. For example, Pir Sultan directly associates arrogance and hatred with Yazid (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 56), which is why he warns his addressees not to become like Yazid (ibid., p. 119). Kul Himmət and Hatayi also echo this warning, saying that the stench of Yazid could spread to them if they got too close to him, figuratively speaking for the impulsive soul.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, Yazid and the qualities he stands for must be fought. One instrument for this is righteous anger. In a poem, Kul Himmet writes of himself and his addressees that they are the angel of death Azrael for Yazid (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 108). Thus, righteous anger is seen as an instrument to protect against negatively understood qualities and emotions.

Although this form of righteous anger and the rejection of negative emotions particularly apply to the historical figure of the Caliph Yazid I, he is also a personification and symbol of reprehensible actions and negative emotions. Therefore, it is also common to speak of Yazid in the plural to emphasise that he is also a symbolic and not only historical figure (Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 414, 483 f., 517). Often, these “Yazids” are specified with rigidly devout Sunnis, who are often stylised as religious antagonists in Alevi poems with the term “Sofu”—as a synonym for blind religious commitment. Pir Sultan, for example, writes that there are many Yazids among the “present Sofus” (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 53). Thus, the righteous anger also targets rigid believers, who are directly addressed and attacked in several poems. The accusation is usually one of religious insincerity, of displaying piety outwardly by observing religious practices but of being inwardly corrupt (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 107). This is then contrasted with their own religious conviction, which places less emphasis on adherence to rules but more on attitude. Thus, poems addressed to these rigid believers are permeated with the topoi of anger, which are conveyed stylistically in many forms. Kul Himmet addresses his opponents in the very first verse of a poem as follows: “I am talking to you, you, you crazy Sofu” (ibid., p. 116). Pir Sultan Abdal compares religious judges (*kadi*) to pigs and cattle in a poem specifically addressed to them and finally equates them even with the devil himself (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 44). For this reason, the emotion of anger is directed at religious antagonists, who are seen as inheritors of the personified evil, Yazid. This, in turn, is associated with negative emotions that are to be avoided.

#### 4.3. Melancholy and Sorrow

Perhaps the most frequently encountered emotionally relevant theme falls into the category of a feeling mood rather than an object-related emotion: the melancholy that is frequently encountered in the poems is often a basic mood and does not always have to have a trigger. Hardly any term stands more for this melancholic basic mood than “dert”, which can be translated as sorrow or even suffering. It occupies such an important place in Alevi and Bektashi literature that even a poet in the 18th century chose “Dertli” (the sorrowful) as his pen name (Vaktidolu 1998). Of the poets discussed here, the poems of Pir Sultan Abdal, in particular, are permeated by this topos of melancholy. It is among the most frequently used motifs in his poems; his most-known poems today are melancholic right through. Thus, one of his best-known poems asks, “My sorrows are so many, to which shall I surrender?”<sup>12</sup> Never would his sorrow decrease, instead it would increase daily (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 80). Diegetically, melancholy is often stylised by sighs in various forms,<sup>13</sup> and the endlessness and sheer excess of sorrow is often emphasised: not one, not five, not ten sorrows would he have, into the immeasurable, they would reach (ibid., p. 85). After all, even if he were to “count up three days and three nights” of all his sorrows, there would be no end to them (ibid., p. 111). Although not quite as central and poetically multifaceted as in Pir Sultan Abdal, sorrow and melancholy are also a central motif in Kul Himmet’s and Hatayi’s poetry (Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 43, 81, 95, 97, 118 f.; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 419 f., 470, 474 f., 488 f., 525).

Even though melancholy is often an unintentional (i.e., non-object-related) mood and is simply thrown into the room, there are also many passages in which reasons and causes for melancholy are mentioned. Thus, the melancholy in the poems also has object-related characteristics. A central aspect is loneliness, and the pain of separation. Pir Sultan Abdal and Kul Himmet describe how they wander alone and lonely through the mountains. Mountains often serve as a metaphor for seclusion; they are seen as karstic, wild and often associated with loneliness (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 93, 111, 237, 255 f.; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 81, 97). On the one hand, the pain of separation has a profane connotation, as Pir

Sultan Abdal describes the separation from family and loved ones (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 229, 291). On the other hand, and more often, the pain of separation has a mystical dimension. It is the pain of the mystical seeker, who is separated from God and longs for unity again. This motif appears in Sufism in many forms. The most famous metaphor is probably that of Rumi (1207–1273), according to which the sound of the *ney* flute is the lamentation of separation from the reed—analogous to the pain of humans who have been separated from the divine (Schimmel 1982, p. 143 f.). Pir Sultan Abdal frequently draws on profane and religious topoi when addressing the separation from the beloved (*yar*), which could refer to both divine and profane separation (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 82, 86, 111, 267 f.).

However, melancholy also has a positive aspect, as the return to the beloved resolves the sorrow and melancholy. Thus, in the poems, the motif of *dert* (sorrow) is very often followed by that of *derman* (healing). The alliteration of *dert* and *derman*, of sorrow and healing, is omnipresent in the poetry of these three poets.<sup>14</sup> Both sorrow and healing come from God, often indirectly through Ali, who is understood in Alevi poetry as a manifestation of the divine (Kara 2022, pp. 286–92). With all three poets, it is repeatedly Ali and the other Imams who stand for healing from suffering (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 83, 116; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 360, 476; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 94 f.). Thus, Kul Himmet asks in a poem for healing from the pain of separation and sees in the Twelve Imams the guardians of the sea to which he would like to return as a seeker of God (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 118 f.). But also the masters and religious leaders are referred to for healing from sorrow, who fulfil the role of mediation between the lyrical subjects and God and, thus, can lead them back to the divine (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 73, 106). In this way, Ali, the Imams and the religious leaders give the lyrical subjects in the poems a sense of security and safety—despite the sadness and sorrow (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 73; Coşan Eke 2021, p. 170).

#### 4.4. Love and Felicity

The sorrow and melancholy in the poems of Pir Sultan Abdal, Kul Himmet and Hatayi are closely interwoven with ideas of love. Love itself is often described as sorrow, because it leads to a strong longing for the divine. The lover of God loves God so much that he burns for longing: “I’m Pir Sultan Abdal who could endure love/My heart burned in the embers of longing” (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 124). In particular, the metaphor of the burning love, often expressed with the term *aşk*, is found repeatedly in Sufi mystical literature (Schimmel 1982, pp. 83–133). In another poem by Pir Sultan Abdal, which has been musicalised several times, the refrain states that the lyrical subject “burns and burns” because of the sorrow of the friend, i.e., God (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 114). Kul Himmet also writes that one must burn for this sorrow (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 149). Out of this burning love, the poets repeatedly describe motifs of rapture and even ecstasy, mostly symbolised by the term and motif *coşku* (rapture). In all three poets, the theme of the rapture of love is found diegetically and on an expressive level in many ways (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 88 f., 96; Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 43; Aslanoğlu 1992, 386 f., 431 f.).

In particular, the metaphor of the butterfly that is attracted by the embers and knowingly flies into the flame and burns is used frequently in Sufi literature and also by the poets here (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 88, 102; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 44, 86, 125, 128, 172, 191; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 443, 496 f., 512). Thus, the willingness not only to suffer but even to die for love is found repeatedly in the poems (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 59, 80, 89; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 73, 90 f.). This willingness is due to the functional connection between suffering and love in Alevi mysticism. Accordingly, personal suffering is seen here as a necessary evil in order to make a free decision for the love of God. After all, suffering is what makes denial and rejection so appealing and, at the same time, enhances turning to God. Thus, the poets regard suffering as a touchstone for the love of God and, at the same time, as a vehicle for closeness to God. Finally, the poets take the last vehemence out of suffering by the prospect that at the end of the mystical development, humans will become



resistant to suffering and attain felicity (Kara 2023b). Hence, these two motifs of love and suffering, conspicuously, often appear together in the poems (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 46, 99, 117 f.; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 94 f., 138, 149).

The imagery of the willingness to die for love alludes to the Sufi teaching of the annihilation (*fena*) of human beings in God. In addition to the fire metaphor, two other elements are also frequently used in this context: Earth as a symbol of humility and human perfection and water or the ocean as a parable for God, in which human beings dissolve like a drop of water. Thus, the oceanic feeling of perfection finds explicit application in the poems of Pir Sultan Abdal, Kul Himmet and Hatayi: they all enter the ocean like a drop of water and lose themselves in it, becoming one with the ocean, as they affirm in many poems (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 51, 74, 77, 79, 88, 119; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 42, 80, 93, 112, 173; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 471, 502, 512, 523). It is dying before dying that is often alluded to in Sufi mystical literature (Schimmel 1995, pp. 191–214). At the end of this path lies another central emotion, namely, the emotion of happiness. The annihilation of the human being in the divine is described, in particular, with metaphors of happiness, first and foremost with sweet honey (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 78, 81 f., 93, 215; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 43, 65, 84, 98; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 438, 448, 506). The love of God is sweeter than the sweetest honey, as Pir Sultan writes in a famous poem:

Love is sweeter than honey

Didn't I tell you, you will never get enough of it (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 78)<sup>15</sup>

The metaphor of honey is also meant to describe the experiential horizon: for only when you taste the honey, do you know what it tastes like. This is also the case in this poetic tradition with the love of God and the feeling of happiness: they can only be experienced and felt.

The religio-cultural component in this context is, again, the strong emphasis on the Prophet's family, the *Ehl-i Beyt*, and especially Ali. Quite often, Ali undertakes the function as mediator for the love of God. Since Ali is understood as a manifestation of God, love is very often directed towards him. Thus, there are countless poems by all three poets in which they express their love for Ali. One can even state, without exaggeration, that Ali-centred poems make up the largest part of the anthologies and are very often linked to emotionally relevant topoi, such as love, affection and even security.<sup>16</sup> The poets even often draw on topoi from romantic love. For example, they affectionately describe the beautiful crescent shape of his black eyebrows, his lips and eyes (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 59, 76, 128; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 63, 98, 104 f., 141; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 352, 393, 522, 532). Such poems resemble profane love poems, and the dissolution of formats seems to have been the intention of the poets.

## 5. Socio-Religious Dimension: Boundaries through Emotions

The emotions in these poems are more than an individual expression of emotional sentiment: they have a socio-religious component. The codification of emotions by the three poets in question overlaps in a striking way so that one can speak of supra-individual, religio-cultural codifications. In particular, the fact that the poets' names have been used by several people over a long period of time and have been received since then underlines the collective dimension of the representations of emotion discussed here.

The association of central beliefs and basic emotions is particularly noteworthy. The emotion of grief, for instance, very often refers to the mourning of saints, first and foremost to the Imams and within them Imam Husayn. Anger, in turn, is directed at the adversaries of Alevi saints, especially at Yazid as the personification of bad actions and negative emotions, as well as at other religious antagonists. Finally, love—and the willingness to suffer for it—is closely linked to Ali and the *Ehl-i Beyt*. Of course, there are many other emotionally charged topics, but in no other topic is the portrayal of emotions so dense and pronounced. This inevitably raises the question of why these topics in particular

have such a strong emotional basis. These themes are distinguishing features between Alevism and the predominant religious group in the region, Sunnism. They are, therefore, convictions and also historical memories that are primarily intended to emphasise the boundary between Sunnism and Alevism.

The event of Karbala is widely regarded as an important turning point in the collective memory of the Alevis, cementing the separation of Alid and Sunni groups. With the grief for Husayn and the anger for Yazid, the memory of this event is emotionally underpinned. The religious group to be distinguished, Sunnism, is decidedly associated with the murder. Love for Ali is also considered a distinguishing feature, as the poets write that their love for Ali is the reason for their persecution by Sunnis (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 74; Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 116 f.; Aslanoğlu 1992, p. 460). In this respect, it is not about actual, empirically verifiable religio-cultural differences between the two groups but about perceived and ascribed differences. As a result, borders are drawn through emotions and elements are emotionalised that particularly emphasise the perceived differences to the group to be demarcated.

In doing so, the poets use various stylistic means to involve the addressees of their poems in the emotions presented and, thus, call on them to feel the same emotion.<sup>17</sup> In this way, they establish the abovementioned feeling rules from these religiously and culturally codified emotions. They speak in the first-person plural and actively include the addressees in the emotion (cf. Soileau 2017, pp. 561, 569; Coşan Eke 2021, p. 170): “It is we, who mourn the Imams”, as Kul Himmet states in a poem (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 85). He writes the same about the righteous anger against Yazid when he describes himself and his addressees to the angel of death Azrael against the “infidel Yazid” (ibid., p. 108). A comparable pattern is found in Pir Sultan Abdal’s and also Hatayi’s poetry, in which very often the first-person plural is used to include the addressees in the emotion portrayed (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 97, 127, 135 f.; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 360, 364, 371, 381 f., 418, 430). In this way, readers are suggested to share the same emotion that the lyrical subjects express in their poems.

In addition, there are also direct instructions in the imperative to the addressees in which a certain emotion is explicitly expected. In several poems, the addressees are called to certain actions and emotions that they should follow or avoid (Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 32 f., 46–48, 115; Aslanoğlu 1992, p. 369). Occasionally, poets also alternate the direct imperative and the we-perspective within the same poem, so that the addressees are involved in two ways (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 135, 210, 228, 248, 251; Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 78; Aslanoğlu 1992, Hatayi 366 f., 504, 513). In one of the most famous poems in the entire Alevi poetic tradition, it is said in the imperative and in the we-perspective:

Come, O souls. Let us become one

Let us draw the sword on the unbeliever

Let us avenge Husayn’s blood (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 55 f.)<sup>18</sup>

In this poem, which has been set to music several times and is often sung together at gatherings, the poet calls the addressees to a common action rooted in anger against the opponents of Imam Husayn.

In addition, the poets choose community-creating metaphors. For example, the metaphor of a train (*katar*) is often used (cf. Soileau 2017, p. 555). One should join the train to divine unity, the train of the Imams or of Ali, and so on (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 31, 54, 78, 106, 136, 225 f.; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 44, 68, 83 f., 145; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 348, 366, 386, 414, 439, 483). The metaphor is so vivid, as it constructs a need to fit in and remain part of the group, otherwise one runs the risk of losing track (cf. Soileau 2017, p. 555). Often this metaphor is linked to explicit emotions. For Pir Sultan Abdal, those who join the train of the Twelve Imams are the lovers of Muhammad and Ali (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 106). Furthermore, a poem by Kul Himmet states:

Kul Himmet, you too join the train

My vow to Ali is from the very beginning

I love my Shah, his face so beautiful (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 145)<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the poets quite openly pronounce social and discursive sanctions of exclusion: those who do not show sorrow here, anger there and love here do not belong to the group. For instance, Pir Sultan Abdal writes that those who do not show a willingness to accept suffering for the love of God should not join them in the first place: “Those who cannot endure this suffering should not come” (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 95). In other poems, the poets even go a step further: those who do not suffer are not considered part of the group. Since suffering is mystically linked to the love of God in the collective perception, it is assumed that the love of God is not possible without suffering: “Those who do not suffer will not reach the divine truth” (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 33). Furthermore, the addressees are explicitly instructed to avoid negative emotions: “If you want to become a dervish on the path, self-love and hatred do not suit you” (ibid., p. 36 f.).

The love to which the addressees are explicitly called in countless poems very often refers to the *Ehl-i Beyt* and, in particular, to Ali. Pir Sultan Abdal, for example, writes that one must love Ali and that those who do not do so will cause God’s discomfort (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 74). Those who do not love Ali are also actively discredited or even cursed in Kul Himmet’s and Hatayi’s poems (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 82; Aslanoğlu 1992, p. 460). Quite dramatically, for example, a poem by Kul Himmet says in reference to the *Ehl-i Beyt*: “Blessings on those who love them and God’s curse on those who do not” (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 102). In another place, love for the *Ehl-i Beyt* becomes the distinguishing marker of heaven and cursing (ibid., p. 127).

With all these stylistic devices, the addressees are actively included in the represented emotion and its aesthetic experience. They are explicitly encouraged to share with the poets the presented emotional experience. Thus, the emotions covered in the poems of Pir Sultan Abdal, Kul Himmet and Hatayi are to be understood as feeling rules that the addressees have to observe: Noncompliance results in exclusion from the collective. Thus, mourning for Husayn, anger towards Yazid, avoiding negative emotions and, above all, love for the *Ehl-i Beyt* and, especially, for Ali become criteria for belonging to the collective.<sup>20</sup> Quite explicitly, those who do not observe these feeling rules are excluded from the group. The study, thus, shows how certain emotions are linked to certain doctrines and elements of cultural memory that are considered important for the constitution of the collective. Various rhetorical stylistic devices are used to convey to the addressees how they should react emotionally to certain ideas, memories and doctrines. Thus, doctrine and emotion, religious teaching and aesthetic experience are directly connected. The constitutive convictions are, however, not only emotionally supported, but they also become feeling rules whose observance is obligatory for belonging to the group. In this way, boundaries are drawn through emotions and elements are emotionalised that particularly emphasise the perceived differences to the group to be demarcated.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper attempted to argue that emotion–theoretical approaches offer an important perspective on socio-religious processes of group formation in Alevism. Poetry, in particular, which has been highly valued in Alevi communities both in the present and the past, proves to be very fruitful for such an investigation, as it reveals the manifold representation of emotions. The present study investigated the shared representation of emotions in perhaps the three most important representatives of Alevi poetry. Although the poets also have individual characteristics in their poetry, there are very large overlaps and recurring topoi in the representation of emotions, beginning with the choice of the portrayed emotions, through their religio-cultural codifications, up to the images and metaphors used. Particularly interesting is the close entanglement of central convictions, such as the memory of Karbala or the belief in the *Ehl-i Beyt* and, especially, in Ali, with distinct emotions such as love, grief and anger. In the Alevi self-understanding, these elements are central components of their religious convictions, which can be considered constitutive for the group formation.

Thus, convictions are emotionally charged, which particularly emphasises the perceived border to Sunnism, i.e., to the religious group with which Alevism has shared a long history of conflict. Consequently, border-forming teachings are emotionalised and, thus, the border to the dominant surrounding religious group is drawn through emotions.

Furthermore, the emotional demarcation is reinforced by the fact that this doctrine-cum-emotion linkage fulfils the function of feeling rules that have to be observed. With the use of various rhetorical stylistic devices, the addressees are emphatically conveyed on how they have to react emotionally to the mentioned topics in order to be part of the group.

In summary, the present study shows, on the one hand, that in the analysed poems, group-constituting convictions are emotionally substantiated and, thus, the religio-cultural boundaries are emphasised with emotions. On the other hand, these emotions are not simply conveyed, but the addressees are actively called upon to follow these boundary-reinforcing feeling rules. Therefore, the importance of emotions in the history of Alevi poetry and beyond cannot be stressed strongly enough. It is hoped that this intriguing topic will be explored further in future studies.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Emotions in Alevism have so far been researched primarily in ritual studies. Of particular note is the work of my colleague, Deniz Coşan Eke, who discusses in depth the construction of collective emotions in the *Cem* ceremony. In this way, Coşan Eke convincingly shows how emotions are evoked in collective rituals to create an emotional bond between religious disciples and leaders and, thus, strengthening social formation on a local and translocal level (Coşan Eke 2021, pp. 132–70). Furthermore, Marzena Godzińska compares ritualised emotions in the *Muharrem* commemoration of Alevi and Bektashi in a short article (Godzińska 2009). Other ritual researchers such as Robert Langer (e.g., Langer 2020, p. 25 f.), historians such as Rıza Yıldırım (Yıldırım 2018b, pp. 22–24), memory researchers such as Béatrice Hendrich (Hendrich 2004, pp. 173–75) and musicologists such as Martin Greve (Greve 2020, pp. 108 f., 125) or Irene Markoff (e.g., Markoff 2021, p. 95 f.) stress, albeit not systematically or extensively, the emotional component of Alevi ritual practice. In this context, it would be interesting to explore how emotions are evoked, performed and received in the ritual use of the poems. However, this would go beyond the scope of the present paper, which focuses on the textually represented emotions in the poems.
- <sup>2</sup> This is reflected, among other things, in the fact that Alevi institutions bear the names of these poets; for example, there are traditional Alevi networks (*ocak*) named after Pir Sultan Abdal and Kul Himmet (Yaman 2006, pp. 120, 123). Even today, their importance is reflected in the naming of newer institutions; for example, the *Cem*-House in Vienna is named after Hatayi, and the office of the Federation of Alevi Youth in Bavaria is named after Pir Sultan Abdal (Bundeskanzleramt 2023, p. 53; BDAJ Bayern 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> In general, Alevi poetry shows considerable reception of Persian Sufi poetry, as, for example, Caroline Tee convincingly demonstrates in an ethnographic study of a 20th century Alevi poet (Tee 2013).
- <sup>4</sup> This naturally raises the question of how to distinguish poems of the historical Hatayi (i.e., those penned by Shah Ismail I) from poems of pseudo-Hatayi. An important indicator here is the metre; with few exceptions, the historical Ismail used the more elaborate *Aruz* metre of high literature, while the Anatolian pseudo-Hatayi primarily used the simpler *Hece* metre of “folk poetry” (Gallagher 2004, pp. 151–67).
- <sup>5</sup> In line with many historical approaches to emotion research, it would be very interesting to reconstruct the agents’ concepts of emotion. How did they define and conceptualise emotions and emotion terms? Barbara Rosenwein, for example, suggests in her study on “emotional communities” in the Middle Ages to first reconstruct the historical understanding of emotions and emotion concepts (Rosenwein 2007, pp. 32–56). On this basis, the historical specificity of emotional communities could finally be reconstructed, also in direct comparison with contemporary understandings of emotion (ibid., p. 191). However, this usually requires lexical or comparable data on emotion terms from the respective historical discursive context. Rosenwein, for example, uses emotion definitions of the ancient author Cicero for the analysis of medieval emotional communities, since Cicero’s concepts would have continued to have an impact into the Middle Ages (ibid., p. 30). It would also be highly interesting for the present paper to know how the poets discussed here conceptualised emotions or to which canon of emotion terms they referred. As a

researcher, however, one encounters several obstacles; for instance, there are no known works from the discursive milieu that define emotions more precisely and to which the contemporaneous poets could have referred.

- 6 In the Alevi culture of remembrance, with the exception of the last Imam, all other Imams have been the victims of assassinations, although this cannot be verified historiographically. See, for example, (Gülçiçek 2004, vol. 1, pp. 332–96).
- 7 The following is just a selection: (Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 44, 107–11, 170 f.; Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 57, 97, 124, 127; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 408–10, 482 f., 517 f.).
- 8 In the *Cem* ceremony, for example, water is distributed to the participants during the sequence of the so-called *sakka* while commemorating Husayn and cursing Yazid. See, for example, (Coşan Eke 2021, pp. 163 f.).
- 9 In classical Sufism, the *nefs* is divided into three levels of which the lowest level, the so-called “commanding *nefs*” (*nefs-i emmare*), is to be understood as the lower soul (Schimmel 1995, pp. 166–72).
- 10 Original: “Bu *nefs-i emmare* yedi sıfattır/Kavgadır gıybettir hürstir hasettir/Tâma şehvet hepsinden eşittir/Kimseye eyleme bûhtanı kardaş”.
- 11 (Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 179); the same poem is also written under the pen name of Hatayi (Aslanoğlu 1992, p. 524; see also Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 53, 75, 127, 208, 253; Aslanoğlu 1997, p. 170).
- 12 In the original: “Derdim Çoktur hangisine yanayım”. The poem has been set to music several times (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, p. 83).
- 13 In the original by the literal sigh expression “ah etmek”, i.e., uttering “ah” (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 80, 124, 250, 276, 284, 288).
- 14 The following is just a selection: (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 80, 83, 107, 116, 120 f., 133, 216, 219, 225, 235, 252, 267 f.; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 93, 95, 108, 118 f., 134, 146, 166; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 358, 360, 386, 414, 419, 422, 437, 452, 474 f., 489, 525).
- 15 Original: “Muhabbet baldan tatlı olur/Doyamazsın demedim mi”.
- 16 The following is just a selection: (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 2010, pp. 45, 60, 74, 86 f., 91, 107, 116, 135 f.; Aslanoğlu 1997, pp. 43, 62 f., 71–79, 82, 86, 89, 91–93, 100, 121–27, 138, 141, 145; Aslanoğlu 1992, pp. 345, 353, 355, 357, 359, 365, 381, 481 f., 489–91, 498 f.).
- 17 Hasret Tiraz’s stylistic analysis of the speech act in the poems, although without addressing emotions, provided important impulses for the analysis of the addressees’ participation in what is poetically conveyed (Tiraz 2021b).
- 18 Original: “Gelin canlar bir olalım/Münkire kılıç çalalım/Hüseynin kanın alalım”. In today’s versions, the harsher passages are mostly replaced; “blood”, for instance, is replaced by “justice” (*hakk*).
- 19 Original: “Kul Himmet’im sen de katara düzel/Alî’ye ikrarım ezeldir ezel/Severim şahımı hüsnü ne güzel”.
- 20 Drawing on events from collective memory to evoke emotions can also be observed in ritual practice, as Deniz Coşan Eke demonstrates in her study on emotions in Alevi collective rites (Coşan Eke 2021, pp. 162–67).

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